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Review

AHMED HASSEN OMER, *Aleyyu Amba: L'Ifat et ses réseaux politiques, religieux et commerciaux au XIX^e siècle*

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AHMED HASSEN OMER, *Aleyyu Amba: L'Ifat et ses réseaux politiques, religieux et commerciaux au XIX^e siècle*, Annales d'Éthiopie, Hors-série, 6 (Addis Abeba: Centre français des études éthiopiennes—Éditions de Boccard, 2020). 339 pp. Price: €39.00. ISBN: 978-2-7018-0607-5.

This book is a major contribution to the knowledge of the history and society of Yəfat (Ifat). It is the result of years of research by Ahmed Hassen Omer, from work for his BA in 1986 to his PhD thesis of 2007. The book takes us through the ups and downs of Yəfat and the market town of Aliyu Amba. The author has some unique qualifications for this job—skills in many languages, a solid training in historical method, and, above all, a family background which has given him exceptional access to well-placed informants. The book is a gold mine of information for generations of historians to come.

As the title suggests the book concerns itself with the Aliyu Amba market town and the wider Yəfat region in the nineteenth century, however, it deals with much more. It covers the medieval background of the region, as well as the wider political context throughout the centuries covered. The book traces four general topics: (1) Islam, (2) regional and national politics, (3) trade and trade routes, and (4) towns and urbanization. These topics are briefly outlined below. The coverage of Islam and Muslim scholars is a major contribution, written with authority, but it is somewhat to the side of the main topic. Ahmed also deals with the variable and occasionally very repressive state policy towards Muslims, already well described in several historical works. Here he adds new knowledge in his treatment of Muslim resistance movements. The political importance of Yəfat was linked to its role in trade, a 'port' for the caravans crossing the Dänkäl desert and therefore a main hub in the regional trade routes within Ethiopia until the pull of Addis Abāba became too great. The book brings out elements of the linkages between local trade, regional networks, and the caravan routes towards the coast. The central topic is the market towns of Yəfat, above all Aliyu Amba. He situates this within the political context and the system of trade routes; the author also brings some life to the market town of Aliyu Amba during its heydays in the nineteenth century. In sum, the description of Muslim scholars, the market town of Aliyu Amba, and the different social categories involved in the regional trade are the high points of this book.

The history of this part of Ethiopia has been covered in many historical works, almost exclusively based on European sources. In the 1840s, several Europeans—diplomats, missionaries, and explorers of all kinds—visited the kingdom of Šāwa, most of whom entered via Aliyu Amba. Ahmed has a somewhat different take on this history, seeing it with local eyes. He has an excellent command of the travel literature and the European archives and has put them to good use. What makes this book stand out, however, is his use of local

sources—manuscripts in Amharic, Arabic, and Gə‘əz, and not the least the extensive use of oral sources. Here I would certainly have liked even more.

A book of this kind, dealing with facts much more than interpretation, deserves precise references. Written sources are always referred to precisely, with pagination, in ways that seem generally convincing. I have not cross-checked against the sources but found one obvious error when a reference to Charles-Xavier Rochet d’Héricourt (1841) was used to document activities of Pierre Arnoux in the 1870s (p. 148, n. 57). This may be but an exceptional error due to reorganization of the text and does not detract much from the general impression of good scientific craftsmanship. A more serious critique is a certain tendency to document details and leave sweeping statements undocumented. Perhaps the point made is generally accepted in the research literature, but it should be backed up in any instance with a reference to at least one authority. This point is made only because it jars with the otherwise high standard of references and because a few interesting statements are left hanging in the air.

Oral sources are treated with great respect but with much less precision than the written ones. The footnotes only contain the names of the informants. It is difficult to assess the nature of these sources. The problem is only partially mitigated by the detailed and useful presentation of each informant in the bibliography. A general presentation of the methodology, the way the information was recorded, and the length of each interview is crucial in assessing the quality and veracity of the material. Had the interviews been written down, page references in the footnotes would have been most advisable to give them at least the same status as the written sources. Although Ahmed is only following common practice here, much can be improved by these simple means.

It has been a struggle to classify this book. It has a regional focus, but can scarcely be labelled a regional history or a history of Aliyu Amba town. It goes far beyond, whether good or bad. The author tends to wander off wherever his sources take him, whether central to the narrative or not. Here more and better use of oral sources could have made it possible to stick to the topic specified in the title. The book would also have gained from using the existing research literature to establish the context efficiently, rather than citing primary sources. Finally, the text is repetitive and in need of more tight editing. The author states time and again that Yəfat and/or Aliyu Amba were important, documented this almost always by reference to primary sources rather than cross-referencing where this has been firmly established elsewhere in the text.

The author has exceptional knowledge of the region and topics covered, but for the less knowledgeable than he this is not easy stuff. The book could have been made more accessible to the reader. The text occasionally moves quickly in time in ways that are not easy to follow. Furthermore, an index would have been most useful to keep track of personalities and place names. There are maps, but

they do not necessarily correspond to the text. It would have been useful with as precise identification as possible of the many place names since many of them are not well known and may be difficult to locate in the future. It is also a problem that some place names are found in many parts of Yəfat. This is aggravated by some variation in spelling, which made me uncertain of whether it was the same place or two different ones. The bibliography is comprehensive, but consists of so many parts that it takes time to locate a source cited in a footnote. These shortcomings may be irritating for the critical reader who has to cross-check everything—to understand details and the resulting validity of the historical reconstruction. Others can just ignore them and enjoy this original account of the culture and history of Yəfat by a highly accomplished scholar.

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ELLENI CENTIME ZELEKE, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016*, Historical materialism book series, 1570–1522, 201 (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2019). 281 pp. Price: €135.00. ISBN: 978-9-004-41475-4.

The book under review reconsiders the history of the Revolution of 1974 and the student movement of Ethiopia. It is not a book of the history of the Ethiopian student movement or the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974. It is a book that argues in favour of a Marxist reading of history to analyse the student movement, while contextualizing and defining terms that were common to the movement then, and to Ethiopian politics today. Based on a selected group of secondary sources, Elleni strives to understand how Marxist and mainstream social science studies persist as tools of the educated in political struggles in Ethiopia all the while engaging with international and global movements. The social sciences are broadly those fields that study societies and relationships among individuals in those societies. The book explores the persistence of using social sciences from the times of the intellectuals of the 1960s to Ethiopian politics today.

Elleni's notable contribution with this book is in showing the lasting legacy of the student movement. This legacy Elleni presents as the act of using social sciences as a means to present solutions in Ethiopia, and the dominating belief that they should do this instead of being spaces to understand, criticize, question, and probe ideas central to Ethiopian experiences. According to Elleni, the social sciences have become tools used 'to produce a direct benefit for society rather than being understood as a space that opens up a critical and philosophical dialogue on social reality' (p. 10). Based on this, Elleni skilfully demonstrates how various social science theories and methods that were discussed and debated by